

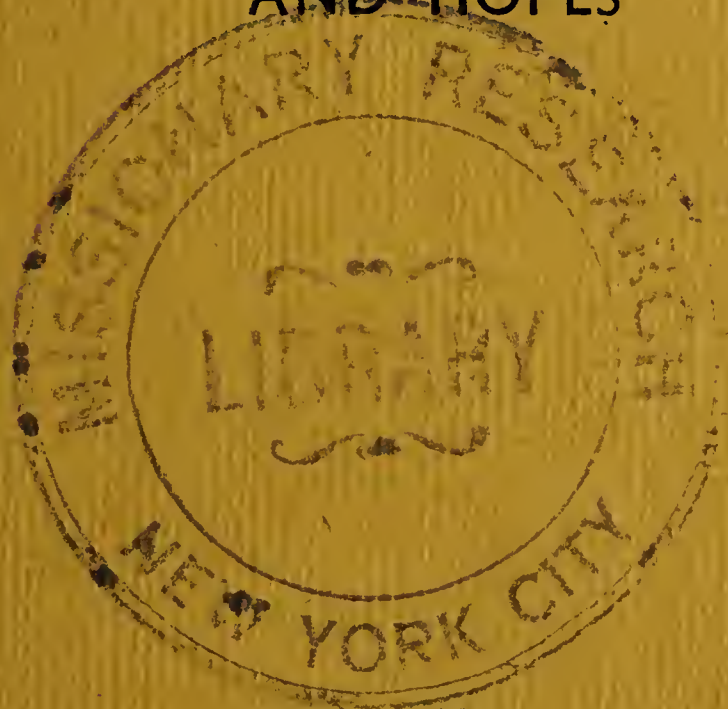
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# **BAPTISTS**

## **in the U. S. S. R.**

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SOME FACTS  
AND HOPES



BY

**J. H. RUSHBROOKE, M.A., D.D., LL.D.**

*President of the Baptist World Alliance*

**FOURPENCE**



# Baptists in the U.S.S.R.

SOME FACTS AND HOPES

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# BAPTISTS IN THE U.S.S.R.

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THE fact that there are large numbers of Baptists in the U.S.S.R. has come as a surprise to many well-informed persons

**The Silence of Years Broken.** even within their own communion. In recent years little has been heard of Russian Baptists. Soon after the Baptist World Congress held at

Toronto in 1928, and attended by their representatives, correspondence between them and their fellows in other lands abruptly ceased. Its volume is still extremely small. The few letters and telegrams have given no picture of the life and activities of the churches. They have expressed the natural concern of loyal Soviet citizens for their invaded homeland, and a passionate desire for victory over the Fascist enemy; and they have laid stress on the need of immediate and substantial help. Owing to lack of information, statistics published by the Baptist World Alliance have included no figures for the U.S.S.R. The Alliance stands by the principle that its statements shall be precise and fully certified; they therefore cover only bodies definitely reporting, and exclude mere estimates—however credible these may appear. Notes have been added year by year that the total Baptist church membership in the world—now over  $12\frac{3}{4}$  millions—would be increased by at least hundreds of thousands if reports could be obtained from the Soviet Union.

The news received during the past few months includes two statements of importance. One is that the Government is “doing everything possible to help believers”; the other is that the Baptists and “Evangelical Christians” (who, as we shall see, are also Baptists) number 4,000,000. These declarations come from themselves. A further significant fact is that on the 7th February, 1943, these bodies joined in the observance of “Baptist World Alliance Sunday,” a day devoted by Baptists in all parts of the earth to common worship, prayer, and testimony.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In many British Baptist churches collections were taken on that day on behalf of Mrs. Churchill's Red Cross Fund for aid to Russia.

Who are these people that have within the past few months caught the attention of the world?

**Baptists under Tsardom:** Already in Tsarist days there existed in Russia two organised groups, known respectively as the "Union of Baptists" and the "Union of Evangelical Christians." The difference of name was due to independent origin, and to years of separated activity. Both Unions, however, were known abroad as Baptist; both became members of the Baptist World Alliance, and both have been represented in its Executive Committee. Shortly after the establishment of the Soviet Government they expressed their essential unity of outlook by accepting a common declaration of faith and order, and since the Nazi invasion they have in a joint appeal addressed the Baptists of all lands as their "co-religionists." These bodies include, as far as is known, the whole of the Baptists of the U.S.S.R. An outline of their early history will cast light upon the duality of organisation.

The beginnings of the Russian Baptist movement<sup>2</sup> are traceable to religious awakenings, during the latter half of the 1860's, in certain southern regions, Transcaucasia and Ukrainia. In Transcaucasian Tiflis lived a merchant named Nikita Voronin, a leader of the Molokan community. The subject of baptism had come up for discussion among the Molokans, and Voronin gave himself to a study of the New Testament teaching on the matter. The result was a profound spiritual experience—his religion had hitherto been merely an element of his inheritance—and a change of outlook which led him to desire baptism as a believer. He was ignorant of the existence of such people as Baptists; and only after his convictions had taken form did he learn from a German artisan that they were shared by thousands and even millions in other lands. Around Nikita Voronin, who was baptised on the 20th August, 1867, there gathered a small group to form in 1868 the earliest Russian Baptist church. It steadily grew. In 1871 two young men,

<sup>2</sup> This pamphlet ignores the non-Slav races of the Tsarist Empire. Among Letts, Esthonians, and German settlers there were thousands of Baptists before the Revolution. Mennonites and certain other "sectarians" also share some of their convictions.



V. G. Pavloff and V. V. Ivanoff-Klishnikoff, joined its ranks ; these proved eager evangelists, who were destined to exercise a powerful influence on the development of the movement. (Both lived to see the end of the Tsarist *régime*.) Meanwhile in Ukrainia the “Stundist” movement, originating among German colonists, had begun to gain Russian adherents ; and among these “Stundism”—at first a somewhat chaotic pietism—came during the “seventies” to assume a definitely Baptist form, largely owing to contact with the stronger movement spreading from the Caucasus. With the formation of the Russian Baptist Union in 1884, assimilation was complete. At times severe persecution was endured under the Tsardom, especially while the notorious Pobiedonostseff held office as Procurator of the Holy Synod. Its typical forms were imprisonment and exile, though the knout and the compulsory christening of infants played a part ; but in spite of all, the Baptists multiplied.

The main stream of Russian Baptist life thus had its source in Caucasia, received a strong tributary from south-western Russia, and flowed onward as the Union of Baptists.

In the middle seventies another movement started, which like the “Stundist” eventually became Baptist both in doctrine and polity. In certain respects it differed from that we have described. It was northern instead of southern ; at the outset it was largely aristocratic rather than popular ; and it owed much to direct influence from abroad. An Englishman, Lord Radstock, a pietist of the “Plymouth Brother” type, had been invited by a Russian woman of high social standing to come to St. Petersburg, and the first of a series of visits took place in 1874. His preaching in the houses of members of the aristocracy was very effective. Count Bobrinsky, at one time a minister of State, became a convert ; others included Count M. M. Korff and Colonel Pashkoff. These men began to evangelise working people and peasants on their estates, to print and distribute tracts, and to organise Christian philanthropic efforts. The groups of believers were loosely joined ; like the Stundists of the south they had separated from the Orthodox Church, and like them lacked clear and positive convictions. The higher intellectual development of the

**A Northern  
Movement:  
“Union of  
Evangelical  
Christians.”**

leaders, however, guarded the "Pashkovites" (as they came to be nicknamed) from some of the excesses of the earlier Stundists. Shortly after the foundation of the Baptist Union in 1884, they invited its representatives to a conference with a view to co-operation, but the differences then proved too strong. The conference had an unfortunate sequel: it had drawn the attention of the clergy and the political authorities to the irregular evangelistic activities centring in St. Petersburg, and soon afterwards Pashkoff and Korff were exiled.

In 1888 Ivan S. Prokhanoff came to the city, and speedily gained a position of leadership. Two years later he left for a period of study abroad, in the Baptist College at Bristol, England, and in the Universities of Berlin and Paris. He returned to St. Petersburg as an engineer and assistant professor; but his chief interest was in his religious work. He devoted his considerable literary gifts to the issue of periodicals, and a hymn-book which included many of his own compositions; and he proved an efficient organiser. In 1908 Prokhanoff founded the "Union of Evangelical Christians," which from that time cultivated relations with Baptists outside the land. The movement had at last found a name, which its leader stoutly defended as preferable for use in Russia.<sup>3</sup>

**The Revolution:  
Inevitable  
Clash with  
State Church.** The Revolution of 1917 was carried through by the Communist Party with Lenin as its supreme leader. It is easy to understand that any fundamental change from the conditions of Tsarist Russia, by whomsoever undertaken, must have involved conflict with the Orthodox Church. From the days of Peter the Great that Church had been, in form as well as in fact, directly controlled by the State. It could without unfairness be described as a branch of the Civil Service. For wealth, power, prestige, and promotion, the clergy depended upon the Autocracy. Subservience to the Romanoff dynasty, involving the acceptance of an unen-

<sup>3</sup> Prokhanoff regarded "Baptist" as the correct description of his position for use abroad, and he served for a period as a vice-president of the Baptist World Alliance. In the U.S.S.R. the identity was fully understood: I have repeatedly heard members of his group described by Soviet officials as "Baptists." During the early years of Soviet rule the two Unions took steps towards fusion, but unfortunate incidents frustrated a widespread desire.



lightened and anti-democratic outlook, characterised the Church as an institution. It is true that some individuals had come to acknowledge the need of change. The "Living Church" has often been derided as a product of Bolshevism, but it represented the re-emergence of an earlier effort for reform which found public expression during the brief period of "freedom" in 1905. There were priests in the Duma who supported advanced legislation, but "*en masse* the clergy and many laymen were solid for the Imperial régime. Few tolerably radical reforms would have been acceptable to them."<sup>4</sup> The liberation of the people could not be accomplished without a serious collision with the State Church. As it turned out, the agent of drastic change was the one party which had revolted not only against the abuses of religion, but against religion itself, and had adopted the dogma that "religion is the opium of the people." That fact made the clash doubly certain, and intensified its bitterness. There is no need to enlarge upon the support for the attitude of the Communist Party provided by the conditions of the one Church with which its members and the vast majority of Russians were familiar, or to criticise a dogma which closed the mind against impartial enquiry. History will render its dispassionate verdict on such matters.

**General  
Attitude of  
Baptists.**

What was the general attitude of the Baptists to the Revolution of 1917? They had no such links with the old order as had the Orthodox Church; indeed, they had suffered heavily under it. Their church organisation rested on a simple democratic basis; for the principle of autocracy it had no place. They were primarily concerned with the relations of men to God, and with the winning of their fellows to personal acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the main, they were disposed to hold aloof from political debate, and to stress the supreme importance of the inner life. They knew that the value which the New Testament sets on human personality found no adequate recognition in the Tsarist social system, and they regarded the interference of politicians and police with worship and preaching as an unwarranted infringement of God-given rights. Violent rebellion was far from their

<sup>4</sup> *The Christian Church and the Soviet State*, by Serge Bolshakoff (S.P.C.K.), p. 32.

thought; but they owed to the established order neither gratitude nor reverence, and had no disposition either to stir a finger in its defence or to regret its overthrow. The few Baptist leaders actively interested in political issues were associated with the advocacy of radical change. Obviously they could not be members of a party which excludes every adherent of any religious body, however fully they might accept a collectivist ideal and appreciate a concern for the secular interests of the common man.

**Revolutionists distinguished between Orthodox and "Sectarian."**

The revolutionists, despite their avowed contempt for all religion, were not blind to realities. Knowing that the "sectarians" as such stood apart from the old State Church, they regarded them as potential allies in the struggle against a hierarchy and a priesthood which would naturally be eager to defend possessions and privileges, and might as naturally desire the restoration of the political system under which these had been gained and held. In dealing with the Orthodox Church the principle *Divide et impera* was freely applied. Dissident groups of clergy, such as those forming the "Living Church," the "Regeneration," the "Ancient Apostolic," or the "Labour Church," were encouraged with a view to weakening the main body, whose Patriarch (Tikhon) had excommunicated all adherents of the Revolution, and whose priests in not a few cases frankly supported the "Whites" in the civil war against the "Reds." The details of the story do not here concern us; we have directly to do with the relations between the new State and the Baptists. How were these affected by the action of the revolutionary Government? What was the Baptist reaction to the specific changes which it made?

**Baptists welcomed earlier Soviet Legislation, except Suppression of Sunday Schools.**

The answer is that at the outset, except on one point, Soviet legislation and administration commanded the general support of Baptists. The new Constitution separated Church and State, thus giving effect to a principle which Baptists have held through all their history. It allowed freedom of propaganda either for or against religion, which again is an expression of their doctrine of liberty of conscience and per-



sonal responsibility to God. In respect of association and worship they were in general left undisturbed, and local difficulties arising through the action of minor officials were usually solved by an appeal to the central authorities. The single issue which gravely troubled them was the legal veto on Sunday schools. The law separating the school from the church forbade the carrying on of any school or class for the instruction in religion of any person below the age of eighteen years; and a "class" was officially defined as a group of children exceeding three in number, if taught by any other than a parent of the children. Sunday schools were thus ended; and this provision bore harshly upon such bodies as Baptists and Mennonites, who regarded the religious training of the young as a solemn duty. That parents were free to teach their children did not meet the case; for the adult members of the churches had grown up under Tsarist conditions, and therefore few had received more than—at best—a bare minimum of elementary education. They depended on the church fellowship to give their children, through the Sunday school, the Biblical knowledge and instruction which they themselves were incompetent to offer. The question was to them far more serious than to members of the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox stress on sacerdotal and sacramentarian elements left the essential matters in the hands of the ordained priesthood, and indeed made the ordinary church adherent little more than a passive recipient of the grace ministered through priestly rites. The Baptists, on the other hand, though setting high value on the preaching and pastoral service of whole-time ministers, did not look upon these as members of an indispensable order. They regarded the church as a brotherhood of believers; preaching, the administration of baptism or the Lord's Supper, the leadership of worship, could all be undertaken by any member possessing the confidence of the brotherhood. Evidently, such a standpoint demands a high level of religious intelligence and life among the members, and the effective training of children in "the nurture and admonition of the Lord" is all-important for the maintenance of the ideal.

It should nevertheless be added that even this limitation of freedom was cheerfully faced, and after a time largely overcome. Special services were arranged for children, including

prayers and hymns, the reading of the Scriptures, and their exposition in terms adapted to the young. No school was organised, no class formed or register kept, and no teacher appointed; and for several years such gatherings remained within the letter of the law.

There were further difficulties, such as the rigid censorship of all printed matter, heavy burdens in the maintenance of buildings, the requisitioning of premises set apart for worship, and the assignment of inconvenient or awkwardly located substitutes, and so forth. On the whole, nevertheless, the relations with the Soviet authorities were not unhappy except in respect of one major issue, in regard to which it cannot reasonably be supposed that any attack on religion was intended by the Government.

**Pacifism a  
Serious Issue.**

This concerned the bearing of arms. The war which opened in 1914 had, under the tottering and inefficient Tsarist *régime*, sacrificed in millions the manhood of Russia, and brought the country into a state of misery unsurpassed in Europe. By 1917 fierce resentment, the offspring of weariness and disgust, dominated the population. It found expression in mutiny, and in the revolutionary outbreaks that culminated in the establishment of the Soviet authority. It found also another expression: long-cherished pacifist tendencies—one recalls the teachings of Leo Tolstoy—became strong and passionate convictions. The recoil from war was decisive, and nowhere stronger than among the Baptists. Some of their leaders became outspoken and aggressive opponents of military service in every form, and laboured to commit the denomination to the unqualified assertion that no Christian may lawfully bear arms. This upsurge of feeling coincided with the first steps in the organisation of the Red Army—an indispensable instrument for the defence of the Revolution. Soviet officials found it difficult to believe in the sincerity of those who just at that time declared a conscientious objection, and refused to be conscripted. “Baptists served in the army of the Tsar; they refuse to serve in the army of the people.” However honest the plea that the change of view applied to war in general, the suspicion of counter-revolutionary feelings persisted. Scores of young men were shot for refusing to enlist; but within a comparatively short time the regulations were



relaxed, and a certificate of conscientious belief signed by the responsible officials of a religious body was accepted as a ground for permitting alternative service.<sup>5</sup> For their part, the Baptists refused to admit into fellowship, except after extended probation, young men liable to a call-up; they took this decision in order to exclude any persons who might offer an insincere religious profession whilst in fact seeking to evade their legal responsibilities.

**Russian  
Baptist  
Statement  
(June, 1928).**

Both groups of Baptists having, after some internal strain, expressly repudiated anti-militarism as an element of their generally accepted doctrine, continued their work without serious disturbance until the close of the year 1928 and the opening months of 1929. In June, 1928, delegates of the two Unions were permitted to attend the Baptist World Congress in Toronto, where the Baptist leader P. V. Ivanoff-Klishnikoff was able to say to the assembly:<sup>6</sup>

“The constitution of our country decrees and realises in practice the complete separation of the Church from the State—a principle of peculiar value for Baptists at all times. Further, in accordance with the Constitution of the Soviet Republic, every citizen can propagate any religion. Religious freedom and anti-religious propaganda is the right of all

<sup>5</sup> A Minute of the Baptist World Congress in Stockholm, following the text of a resolution on International Peace, indicates the position in June, 1923. (See the Official Report, pp. xxx-xxxi). It reads:

“The following memorandum, approved for publication by the Committee on Resolutions and by the Executive Committee, was presented through Dr. Rushbrooke for record:

“Some of the Russian brethren, while agreeing with all which the resolution contained, have asked that a sentence be added, declaring army service under all conditions unlawful for Christian men.

“The Committee on Resolutions was unable to accede to their request, since such a declaration would not represent the general conviction among Baptists. They have an intense horror for war, but have not collectively adopted the doctrine of non-resistance. There have always been among them, and there are still, persons who on conscientious grounds object to any form of military service; and Baptists respect the loyalty to principle which these display.

“The members of the Congress are gratified to know that the Russian Soviet Government accepts alternative service from those who on conscientious and religious grounds are unable to serve in the army.’”

<sup>6</sup> See Official Report, p. 76.

citizens. The freedom of worship with any religious rites is guaranteed, in so far as they do not violate social safety and do not involve infringements on the rights of citizens of the Soviet Republic. In view of this, we have the full right to hold meetings and teach in them the Word of God, and our evangelistic work has already spread beyond the confines of the Russian people and is gradually spreading among the heathens and Mohammedans living in our country. Further, we have the possibility of publishing our periodicals . . . and the Books of Holy Scripture, and also received in 1927 the official authority to open in Moscow a Preachers' School, dedicated in celebration of the sixty years' existence of the Baptist brotherhood in Russia."

These comparatively placid conditions were not destined to last. Already, while the delegates were on the other side

**Baptist  
Growth:  
Strained  
Relations  
(1928-9).**

of the Atlantic, signs of change began to appear. Baptists in the U.S.S.R. had grown, and were still growing, in numbers and influence; tributes to their zeal and energy are found (e.g.) in the book of the Communist

Tikhomirov, published in the year 1928. Unquestionably the Communist Party was disturbed by the success of the religious appeal; hence the violence of its reaction. A fundamental clash of ideology was leading to strain at many points, especially in connection with the Government's agricultural policy. Collectivisation was being pressed, and "collectives" organised. Evangelical believers were anxious to form these under conditions that would further, and not hinder, religious fellowship. It is charged against them that many "appeared to be more concerned with their own future than that of the people as a whole"—a statement which really implies that they attached supreme importance to religion, and therefore their approach to the question differed from the purely economic or administrative. We may recognise in this confused struggle elements of justification for the views both of the evangelical believers and of their opponents; and misunderstanding—perhaps tinged with fanaticism—played a part on both sides. As in the controversy over pacifism, circumstances conspired to suggest that the "sectarians" might be cherishing counter-revolutionary motives. The situation which developed at this period led to



the promulgation of the law of 1929, directed primarily against the evangelical churches. This law is still in effect, and the claim that absolute religious liberty exists in the Soviet Union must be judged in its light. It is published in full as a White Paper,<sup>7</sup> and should be carefully read; the study of its provisions is essential to the understanding of the legal situation in the U.S.S.R. In effect it regards religious bodies as existing for one purpose—the performance of rites. Cultural and economic activities are forbidden them—even to the extent of possessing libraries or organising lectures. Sunday schools had been illegal from the first; now services for children are forbidden. No meetings for Bible study may take place, nor special prayer meetings, nor meetings for women; and organised gatherings and excursions for social enjoyment are likewise suppressed.

**Legal and Administrative Restrictions on Evangelical Liberty (1929).**

Already we have noted the contrast between the Baptist church and the Orthodox congregation. On the latter such restrictions did not bear heavily; for the former, almost everything that gives warmth and reality to Christian fellowship is lost. Nor must it be overlooked that at this same time a revision of the Soviet Constitution excised the right of propaganda *for* religion, whilst retaining the right of propaganda *against* religion. “Freedom of worship” was left—hedged round with restrictions. Evangelistic activity was ended. The “Stalin Constitution” of 1936 holds by the limitations introduced in 1929.<sup>8</sup>

In close connection with these changes came certain administrative acts. The continuance of the Preachers’ School in Moscow was made impossible by the banishment of teachers. The printing of Russian Bibles in the land was brought to an end, and their importation forbidden. Articles

<sup>7</sup> H.M. Stationery Office, Cmd. 3511.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth while to quote the relevant paragraph of the “Stalin Constitution” (Art. 124), which reads:

“In order to ensure to citizens freedom of conscience, the Church in the U.S.S.R. is separate from the State, and the schools from the Church. Freedom of religious worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda is recognised for all citizens.”

in defence of religion could not be published; the frequent attacks on religion had perforce to be left unanswered.

As stated at the opening of this pamphlet, the Russian Baptists have been practically isolated from the end of 1928 until after the Nazi invasion of the U.S.S.R. There is still but little light on their conditions and activity. The Soviet Information Bureau is responsible for the statement that there are "about 1,000 societies and groups affiliated to the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians." This cannot represent the whole of the Baptists, if we take seriously the claim to number 4,000,000 made by the "Baptist" and "Evangelical Christian" signatories of the joint appeal published a few months ago in the *Soviet War News*. An average strength of approximately 4,000 for each society and group appears unthinkable. Whether a separate organisation of Baptists is still functioning, with which the majority of the four millions is connected, but which is accidentally unmentioned, we do not know. We may probably assume that the

**Relations with  
Government  
now cordial.**

increase achieved some fifteen years ago has been maintained in spite of the serious handicap of the constitutional and legal position. It is also certain that under the present conditions of Nazi invasion the loyal support given by Baptists to the Soviet State is unhampered by any trace of doctrinaire pacifism. Stalin himself could scarcely speak more strongly than these "sectarians." Again, the cabled statement that the Government is doing everything possible to help believers must be accepted as evidence of a new cordiality, due perhaps to the unmistakable demonstration of Baptist loyalty and solidarity with fellow-citizens in defence of the motherland. That cordiality, we all hope, may find

**Legal position  
calls for  
revision.**

full and lasting expression in the restoration of the freedom of propaganda for religion which was included in the original Soviet Constitution; in the granting of liberty to carry on Sunday schools, which would in no way disturb the State school system of the U.S.S.R.; in the removal of the veto on Bible classes, prayer meetings, etc.; in the concession of freedom to train preachers and other church workers; and in the granting of permission to print Bibles. Baptists throughout the world would rejoice if action along such lines



should make it possible for them whole-heartedly to acclaim the existence of religious liberty in the Soviet Republic.

**Object of this Pamphlet.** Nothing could be further from the purpose of this pamphlet than to stir up controversy.

It has been written in response to pressing and repeated requests for a statement of the reasons for the definite assertion by responsible persons in the United States of America and in our own land, that religious freedom, as understood in the English-speaking world, is not yet found in the U.S.S.R. It seeks simply to state facts, *in so far as their statement may be helpful at this time*; and the writer is one who ardently desires the ending of any conditions that, by providing fuel for isolationist groups, tend to weaken the influence of those who are working for the co-operation of the Western democracies and the U.S.S.R.

**Baptist Appreciation of unique Soviet Achievement: Hopes for Future.** Let it be said as emphatically as possible that no community can be more ready than the Baptist to acknowledge the many benefits flowing from the Soviet Revolution. It has overthrown, we trust for ever, an ancient and deep-rooted tyranny. It has brought a larger life to the common people, and above all, a new hope for the young. It has triumphed over race prejudice. Education is far more general than in pre-revolution days. The industrialisation of the country has advanced miraculously, and the forecast is entirely credible that within twenty-five years the Soviet Union's production will be the largest in the world. Such unique achievements demand full and frank recognition. If, as Christians, we are constrained to regard the Communist view of man as inadequate, since it excludes the infinite and eternal values arising from his relation to God, we are also under obligation honestly to appraise the vast practical advances in human welfare, and the genuinely altruistic spirit of many who have laboured to achieve them. I bear my own testimony that from the lips of Russian Communists I have heard noble expressions of an ethical outlook truly Christian, for which—though they might be reluctant to admit this—they are historically indebted to the influence of Jesus Christ. In the present struggle against the enslavement of mankind the Soviet Union has rendered

services, and its people have endured sacrifices, that have laid all lovers of liberty under immeasurable debt. We cherish the hope that future years will bring an ever-growing intercourse and a deepening understanding of the great Union of Republics which covers one-sixth of the earth, and has so much to teach us.

As a Baptist, I would add a final word. We long for the renewal of that personal contact which we enjoyed with our fellow-Baptists in former years, when not only was there free exchange of letters, but Soviet citizens were permitted to participate in Baptist World Congresses at Stockholm (1923) and at Toronto (1928). When the present war ceases, plans must be made for another Congress of the Baptist World Alliance. Dare we cherish the hope that it might assemble in Moscow?



## Date Due

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